Like the other three novellas of 1945-46, "First Love" circles round scenes of expulsion and departure. A preoccupation with such moments inevitably highlights the relationship between exterior and interior, insides and outsides, and the passage between them — both in the diegesis and in the narrative act. Indeed the sites in focus in each story — if focus is the right word — are not so much sites as passages through or motions between "these long shifting thresholds," as a poem of 1948 puts it. This paper is a brief attempt to chart the thresholds that shift through "First Love."

I turn first to the narrator’s account of his ejection from his father’s house. This episode is a comic one, and it gets its comedy by a juxtaposition of the narrator’s constipation and his departure from the house. It is characteristic of this narrator that the vital event in the story is usurped in the narrative handling of it by the confused memory of bowel-movements or the lack of them. We want to know as much as possible about how he was got out of the house; we get instead an account of his motion-lessness:

One day, on my return from stool, I found my room locked and my belongings in a heap before the door. This will give you some idea how constipated I was, at that juncture. It was, I am now convinced, anxiety constipation. But was I genuinely constipated? Somehow I think not. Softly, softly. And yet I must have been, for how otherwise account for those long, those cruel sessions in the necessary house? At such times I never read, any more than at other times, never gave way to revery or meditation, just gazed dully at the almanac hanging from a nail before my eyes, with its chrome of a bearded strippling in the midst of sheep, Jesus no doubt, parted the cheeks with both hands and strained, heave! ho! heave! ho!, with the motions of one tugging at the oar, and only one thought in my mind, to be back in my room and flat on my back again. What can that have been but constipation? Or am I confusing it with the diarrhoea? It’s all a muddle in my head, graves and nuptials and the different varieties of motion.

Although the constipation displaces the ejection from the house in the narrative, the "muddle" in the narrator’s head produces a rather different relationship between the two elements. Details of voiding and blockage suggest that the ejection can be seen in terms — comic terms — of bowel movement. There are his belongings, "a little heap, on the floor, against the door. I can still see that little heap (...)" There is his resolve to stay: "(...) I’d have barricaded myself in the room, nothing less than gas would have dislodged me." And there is his imagining of "the blessed relief" to be experienced on his departure by "the usual

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pack” who “crammed” the house, with their “rush to the window, each holding back a little (...)” When he finally leaves, “the doors fly open and out they pour (...)” (p. 13).

It would not do to labour what should be seen as a comic effect. My point concerns the emphasis in this episode on the problematics of motion, or, to put it more specifically, of passage through to a different state. “All imagination to be sure,” says the narrator, “I was already on my way, things may have passed quite differently, but who cares how things pass, provided they pass.” And the very next narrative move, in a story obsessed with the passing-on and passing-over commemorated in graveyards, is made thus: “But to pass on to less melancholy matters (...)” (all quotations, p. 13; this same narrative link has already appeared on p. 11). The episode of the ejection has highlighted “varieties of motion”; neither interior nor exterior, neither inside nor outside the house, is the real focus, but the problem of passage between them, of passage through. A similar homology — between the interior and exterior of a house and the interior and exterior of a human body — together with the related focus on passage, is apparent in the narrator’s account of his escape from Anna’s (or Lulu’s) house as she is giving birth to their child. This is the episode which ends the novella, but it bears a disturbing relation to ends and ending — and indeed to definition generally. For it is here that the threshold between interior and exterior shifts most radically.

The keynote of the episode is struck by the narrator’s statement: “What finished me was the birth. It woke me up” (p. 30). The identification with the child implied by these sentences is not only a matter of sympathetic (or empathetic) feeling, “What that infant must have been going through!” (p. 30). It is an identification which has been carefully prepared in the narrative. When Anna first shows the narrator his room, he surveys it “with horror” because of the “density of furniture” and begins “putting out the furniture through the door to the corridor” (p. 24). By the time he has finished, “[t]he door could be opened and closed, since it opened inwards, but had become impassable.” Only the sofa remains in the room, and a little manoeuvring ensures that its back, “hitherto against the wall, was now on the outside and consequently the front, or way in, on the inside. Then I climbed back, like a dog into its basket” (p. 25). And position-wise, it seems, like a baby in the womb (a potential breech-birth, probably, though this is not altogether clear). The connection between the womb and the narrator’s desperate need to retreat from experience is supplied by a strange effect in his account of the naked Anna showing off her pregnancy to him: